Poet, Cabrillo instructor dies

A story that especially resonated with Tagami, Lydon said, was a four-day race riot in Watsonville in 1950, culminating in the murder of a 22-year-old Filipino laborer, Fermin Tobiera.

Tobiera ran off with it,” Lydon recalled, adding “it hit something within him which produced some pretty remarkable poetry... That story and that contest gave him the basis for an awful lot of stuff that he wrote later on.”

In 1977, Tagami transferred to San Francisco State College and joined an Asian-American artist and writers collaborative, publishing short stories and poems that focused on factory and field workers, while holding down a variety of odd jobs.

He wanted to write about others who came to him, that produced some pretty remarkable poetry... That story and that contest gave him the basis for an awful lot of stuff that he wrote later on.”

“Scared of Pajaro,” which describes a day in the life of Pajaro Valley farmers.

Tagami also authored a collection of poetry, “October Light,” which helped launch four anthologies, including “Without Names” and “Monterey Poets and Writers,” and lectured at universities throughout the West Coast and in Hawaii.

In the 1990s, he received a bachelor of arts in literature from UC Santa Cruz, then went on to obtain a master's degree in English from San Francisco State. Meanwhile, he began working at Cabrillo College, where he most recently taught writing, composition and literature.

In the spring, around the time he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, Tagami was notified that he was scheduled to be inducted into Watsonville High School's Hall of Fame at the Henry J. Mello Center.

Lydon accepted the award on his behalf, and as part of the ceremony he read Tagami's poem, “Tobiera,” prompted by the story he'd heard in Lydon's class 40 years earlier.

To Tagami, Tobiera’s death was symbolic of everything that was wrong with social justice. "Justice was one of his beacons and his death seems to be an injustice.”